Saint Lawrence's Church, Mereworth and more

A further miscellany of our history

The picture above is from the church mausoleum and shows the heart shrine which was saved from the old church that once stood by the castle (see "Old Mereworth Castle and Church" on page 32)

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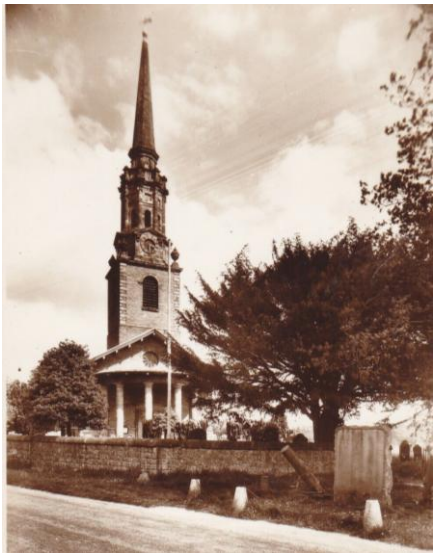
The front cover picture is of a white rose ceiling painting in a side aisle of the church (see "Roses and Carnations" on page 7)

For more information on Jacobite symbols scan the QR code below:

Contents

Our Belgian	Page 4
Roses and carnations	Page 7
The first of the Fallen	Page 8
The Stapletons	Page 16
The Changing Churchyard	Page 26
Mereworth Recipes	Page 30
Old Mereworth Castle and Church	Page 32



The church from The Street (probably 1930s)
(Note the guns either side of the War Memorial. These were removed and melted down for the war effort in 1939 or 1940)

Our Belgian

An inevitable consequence of war will be refugees. When Germany made an unprovoked attack on neutral Belgium in August 1914, thousands of Belgians fled in terror. British newspapers of the time reported the massacre of civilians and the destruction of villages in the wake of the German offensive. Britain offered refuge to some 250,000 Belgians, the largest number of refugees we have ever accommodated at one time. They arrived throughout the late summer and autumn of 1914 as we sent troops into northern France to hold back the German advance.

There was immense sympathy for the plight of the Belgians, even though most British knew very little about them. At first people raised money for them and found them homes. As the War dragged on and hopes of speedy repatriation dwindled, we found them work. Throughout the First World War Mereworth supported the refugee family of one Frans Van der Auwera.

There is not much background in the parish records about Frans Van der Auwera. Was he perhaps the same person mentioned in a September 1914 account of the violation of both Belgian neutrality and the laws of war in Belgian territory? This account was made by Belgian delegates to the United States and is called *The Case of Belgium in the Present War – An account of the violation of neutrality of Belgium and of the laws of war on Belgian Territory*[1]. It contains the following eye witness account of the August 1914 invasion from a 29-year-old labourer of Tamines, near Charleroi:

The Germans came and chased us out of the house on 22nd. We (the men) were chased into the Church and then led four by four to the Square, where they shot at us. I let myself fall, and only about 80 remained out of the four hundred there. Everything is pillaged and burnt. The civilians of Tamines had done no wrong. (Signed) Frans Van der Auwera.

Between November 1914 and April 1915, 125 people in Mereworth donated a total of £135 to support the family of Frans Van der Auwera. Individual donations ranged from the £16 from Lord and Lady Falmouth to the four pence (about 2p) donated by poorer members of the parish. It seems that people gave what they could afford to support this family with a weekly allowance of £1-50. In April 1915, the trustees of the fund recorded, *it is decided to keep the fund open. Any subscription will be gratefully accepted and it is hoped not only to maintain our present Belgian family, but also to accumulate a sum sufficient to restart him in Belgium. Should the fund in hand at the end of the war be sufficient the meeting suggests that part of it be given to some general repatriation fund.* The trustees also decided to buy a sewing machine for *the sole use of the Belgian*[2].

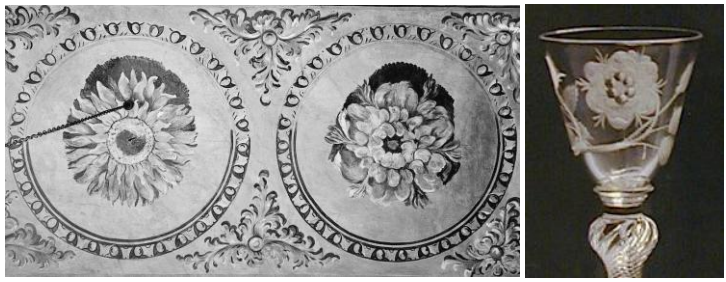
Alas, the war was not short-lived. Its privations were being felt by September 1915 when there was a *general falling off of the subscriptions.* The trustees discussed finding employment for *the Belgian* but arrived at no conclusion. However, it is clear from the account book that Frans Van der Auwera was given work. The book contains the receipts of payments made to him throughout the war, but does not specify the nature of his work. He was housed in a now demolished cottage at Mereworth Cross next to the forge, which has also gone.

After the War ended about £119 remained in the fund (roughly £8,000 in today's money). The trustees met on 16th January 1919 to discuss the best means of ensuring that the remaining money benefitted the Van der Auwera family. They decided personally to hand this money over to Mr Van der Auwera: *This to take place upon receiving information that he is returning to Belgium.* Frans Van der Auwera came to Mereworth on 22nd February 1919 to receive the money, and the receipt book has its last entry on 6th May 1919. This intriguing story reflects the astonishing generosity and hospitality extended to a complete stranger during four years of great stress and uncertainty. Perhaps in an age of greater faith, people were inspired by Leviticus 19:34 - *The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself.*

A contemporary illustration of the massacre at Tamines

Roses and Carnations

Jacobites were supporters of the Stuart dynasty that attempted to regain the English crown in the middle of the 18th century. The side aisle ceiling paintings in Mereworth church almost certainly date from 1746, the year in which the church was consecrated and the year that the Jacobite uprising was crushed at Culloden. The alternate carnations and roses (a rose is pictured on the cover of this booklet) are secret Jacobite symbols. At Chiddingstone Castle there are 1750s drinking glasses with Jacobite rose symbols, such as the one pictured below. "Carnation" is word-play on the hoped-for coronation of James Stuart as James III. In 1750 the Earl of Westmorland, who built Mereworth castle and church, entertained James's son Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie) during the prince's secret visit to England[3'4]. Had the Jacobite cause been successful, the prince would have been crowned King Charles III in 1766 on the death of his father James. Only Jacobite sympathisers would have understood the meaning of these symbols, but how audacious to have advertised one's political allegiance on the ceiling of a church.



Rose symbols of James, son of James II (left: with carnation and stylised oak leaves in the vestry, right: on a Jacobite drinking glass)

The First of the Fallen

The Honourable Vere Douglas Boscawen 3rd August 1890 – 29th October 1914 (from the Eton College Archive)

Vere Boscawen was the first Mereworth casualty of the Great War. As well his name being on the Mereworth war memorial as one who died in action in 1914, Vere is remembered on Panel 11 of the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, on a memorial tablet at Eton College and in the Roll of Honour at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Kent County Archives contains one side of a curious correspondence in French between two high-born ladies during the First World War. One, Lady Rose Weigall (née Fane) lived in Kent; the other, Louise, Grand Duchess of Baden, lived in Germany. The two were old friends and maintained a correspondence despite their respective countries being at war. We have only Louise's letters. The two women wrote to

each other to trace soldiers from both countries who were missing in action – either killed or taken prisoner. In between letters of April and May 1915 there is a single undated note on Louise's official letterheading stating that a search of the official lists of prisoners of war in Germany did not find the name "Vere Boscawen Hon."

Vere was a great uncle of the present Lord Falmouth, and although he spent much of his time in Cornwall, his would have been a familiar face in Mereworth. Vere had been a distinguished cricketer for Eton College, in 1909 taking three wickets for 21 runs against Harrow in a drawn match, and being mentioned in Wisden. In 1909 Vere was admitted as a "pensioner" at Trinity College, Cambridge, leaving with a diploma in 1911. While occasionally attending county balls, Vere spent much of his time between leaving Eton and 1914 promoting agricultural interests. One obituary, dated December 1914, records[7]:

On leaving school he went to Cambridge; whilst there he made a special study of agriculture where, by his keen insight into agricultural problems, he earned the respect and esteem of his tutors. After leaving the university Mr. Boscawen made a special study of farming on the Continent, especially in Denmark, where for over a year he was engaged on a large farm. On returning from the Continent at the beginning of the year [1914], he joined the reserve Battalion of the Coldstream Guards, and on the outbreak of war was posted to the 1st Battalion.

Vere joined the reserve Battalion of the Coldstream Guards in March 1914, initially for officer training. From 4th August 1914, however, Britain was at war with Germany. The First Battalion Coldstream Guards arrived in France on 14th August 1914 as part of the British Expeditionary Force. It had already engaged the enemy at Étreux by the end of the month in the fast-moving engagements that preceded trench warfare[5]. It is unlikely that Vere was with the combatants at this stage of the war; a newspaper article of 13th August 1914 records him as being with his regiment at Windsor.

In September 1914 the First Battalion was taking losses near Rozay-en-Brie and in the Battle of the Aisne. Second Lieutenant Boscawen is recorded as having joined the battalion on 19th October with 144 fresh troops while it was billeted at Hazebrouck.

Vere certainly would have fought at Langemarck on 21st October where 31 of his comrades were killed, 93 were wounded and 73 went missing in action. Following this engagement, the battalion marched to Gheluvelt on the Ypres to Menin Road to hold the line. Their position was overstretched, the defenders were few in number and the battalion had no fall-back position. Most of the soldiers were exhausted by weeks of constant fighting.

The battle of Gheluvelt began on 27th October 1914 and the First Battalion suffered heavy losses. All detailed records of the battalion were lost during this battle, and we only have Sir

James Edmonds' 1937 account of the tragedy that befell those brave men at Gheluvelt on 29th October 1914[6].

The morning of the 29th October was very foggy, but punctually at 5.30 a.m. the Germans began their attack, not south as expected, but on and just north of the Menin Road. Three battalions of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment pushing on in lines of skirmishers, followed by closed bodies — in fours, it is said — attacked the front of the company of the Black Watch on the road and the two weak companies of the Coldstream next to it. Although the Bavarians got within fifty yards without being seen, they were held off for a little time by fire; but they persisted.

At least two of the British machine guns near the road are known to have jammed, and even British rifle fire slackened from time to time, for the cases of a number of cartridges were found too large for the rifles, and this defect greatly contributed to the disasters of the day.

Eventually some Germans broke in near the road and then, turning northwards, rolled up the company of the Black Watch and the two right companies of the Coldstream, party by party, from the right and the right rear; and by 6.30 a.m. they had captured most of them and occupied their trenches.

No artillery support had been given to the 1st Brigade this morning. Only some nine rounds per gun were available, and instructions had been given that if the German attack should

materialize, fire was to be directed on the enemy's artillery rather than on his infantry.

In the battalion's surviving records there is a note dated February 1915 enclosing what records of the battle of Gheluvelt were able to be verified. Only the casualties among the officers are shown on the records – three dead, two wounded and ten missing. By 30th October, however, the fighting force of the battalion was down to 80. Vere is recorded among the missing in action on 29th October[5]. In a couple of days, the Worcester Regiment had recaptured the trenches lost during the German attack, and the line held.

On 9th November one newspaper reported Vere as missing; another of 12th November 1914 reported that Vere had been wounded and taken prisoner. By 17th December the newspapers were reporting that Vere had died a hero's death: *…on 29th October, owing to the falling back near Ypres of several regiments on both their flanks, four companies of the Coldstream Guards were completely surrounded. Mr Boscawen refused to surrender, and fell fighting against overwhelming odds.* Vere's death was certainly known to his parents in early December 1914, as a memorial service to him was held in Mereworth Church on Tuesday 15th December 1914[7].

Vere's bravery and sacrifice held up the German advance, and, despite the near annihilation of the Coldstream Guards at Gheluvelt, had bought time for a counter-attack. The line he defended more or less held until 1918. If Vere's body was ever found it was never identified; he has no known grave.

The *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 19th December 1914 included Vere's obituary[7]. Although the article mentions that Vere had been in the Coldstream Guards Special Reserve since 1912, the London Gazette has no record of Vere before 13 March 1914 when he was gazetted as *late cadet, Cambridge University contingent, Officers Training Corps, to be Second Lieutenant (on probation).* It was not until 6th October 1914, that the London Gazette confirmed Vere in his rank of *Second Lieutenant (on probation)* The *Kent Messenger* obituary of December 1914 records the following under *Kent Casualties*:

BOSCAWEN. —Second Lieut. the Hon. Vere Douglas Boscawen, Coldstream Guards, third son of Lord and Lady Falmouth, was killed in action on October 29th, but the official announcement of his death was made only a few days ago. Born in 1890, the deceased, who was for a time one of the aides-de-camp to the Duke of Connaught, was gazetted to the Special Reserve of the Coldstream Guards two years ago.

An "In Memoriam" service was held at Mereworth Church on Tuesday afternoon, and the sacred edifice was well filled with parishioners and residents of the neighbourhood. Those present included Lord and Lady Falmouth (the bereaved parents), the Hon. Evelyn Boscawen (eldest brother of deceased), the Hon. Miss Pamela Boscawen (sister), besides the tenantry and workmen on the Mereworth Castle Estate. Beautiful white chrysanthemums (the flowers specially chosen by Lady Falmouth), and small palms, adorned the chancel and other parts of the sacred edifice.

The service, which lasted just over half an hour, was fully choral. The Rector, (the Rev. W. Moore) officiated, assisted by the Rev. Mr. Dale (a relative of the deceased) and the Rev. C. H. Coe (Rector of Offham and formerly of Mereworth).

The hymns, we understand, were chosen by Lady Falmouth, also the special Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd". It was also her wish that the church should be vested in white, and the beautiful flowers and pot plants were from the Castle. She specially asked for some thanksgiving for the safe return of King George from the front. In fact the whole note was to be one of thanksgiving and victory rather than that of conventional gloom.

The special prayers in the service included the collect for All Saints' Day and a few petitions from an ancient liturgy of the Russian Church, the liturgy which is used every Thursday evening at Mereworth at the Intercession Service, when all those who have gone from the village are prayed for by name. Mr. Vere Boscawen makes the first gap in the Roll of Honour of the village.

Lord and Lady Falmouth have had four sons at the front, one of whom, the Hon. Geo. Boscawen, of the Royal Field Artillery, was recently mentioned in despatches and awarded the D.S.O. for gallantry during a particularly severe engagement, when he was the only unwounded officer of his battery. Lady Falmouth's brother, the husband of Lady Edith Pennant, was reported missing at the same time as Mr. Vere and news of him is still awaited.

Why, then, did Lady Rose Weigall enquire after Vere Boscawen months after he was known to have died? Was the note put in the wrong place in the archived letters? Did the bureaucracy of tracing prisoners of war take a long time? Or was it that, with no known grave for the Honourable Vere Douglas Boscawen, Rose still held out hope that Vere might yet be found alive?

Vere Douglas Boscawen © Imperial War Museum

The Stapletons

Sir Thomas Stapleton (1766-1831)

In May 1788, aged 21, Sir Thomas inherited a barony and some large estates, including that of Mereworth. The Stapletons came from Greys Court, now a National Trust property in Rotherfield Greys, Oxfordshire. Sir Thomas quickly made Mereworth Castle his principal home. His new estates brought him a large income to supplement what he received from his slave plantations in the Leeward Islands, but also heavy debts.

His predecessor to the barony and Mereworth Castle, his cousin Sir Francis Dashwood, had died in 1781 with unpaid bills and a decade of unpaid interest on the debt – a total that was almost double the additional annual income from Sir Thomas's new acquisitions. Dashwood, famous for being a rake and the founder of the Hellfire Club, had briefly been appointed as Chancellor of the Exchequer, despite being known as someone who did not possess the rudiments of financial knowledge. The estates had been run down considerably under Dashwood[8].

Instead of putting his affairs in business-like order, the ostentatious Sir Thomas immediately began a spending spree. By 1806 his Mereworth debts alone were, in today's values, about £600,000. The village butchers, grocers, bricklayers, coal merchants, carpenters and of course, publicans were all owed money. Sir Thomas, however, did not curb his spending; labourers who had worked for him in good faith went unpaid and faced ruin. In 1819, disgraced and with huge debts, Sir Thomas was obliged to leave the country and live in Brussels on the modest income of, in today's money, around £90,000 a

year – quite a change for someone who had been spending the equivalent of £2½ Million a year.

Sir Thomas's *affectionate and afflicted mother Mary, Lady Stapleton* wrote a rather ambiguous memorial epitaph on his monument in Rotherfield Greys church: *Thou which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth.*

Thomas Stapleton (1792-1829)

Sir Thomas's eldest son, another Thomas, appears to have been little better than his father. He used the family name to run up debts through extravagant and riotous living. Despite being advised to put the boy in the army, Sir Thomas packed him off to Cambridge with an income of £44,000 in today's money. Sir Thomas considered the army to be out of the question, as England was at war with France! Young Thomas appears to have taken over Mereworth Castle after his father left for Brussels. He died two years before his father. His only child, who became Viscountess Falmouth, inherited the estate.

Miles John Stapleton (1801-1830)

Old Sir Thomas had two other surviving sons, both of whom became rectors of Mereworth. The oldest was the Reverend and Honourable Miles John Stapleton. Ann Byam Stapleton (née Kerby) had married the 19-year-old Miles in 1820 when she was aged 24. Ann's father was from Antigua, and Miles would have been aware that much of her wealth derived from slave ownership. Miles died in 1830 at the age of 29 after a short illness in Tunbridge Wells. On becoming a widow, Ann

lived in a grace and favour apartment at Hampton Court Palace until her death in 1842. When the Slave Compensation Act was passed, Ann was compensated for the loss of her 229 slaves on Antigua. She received, in today's money, about £230,000[9].

Visitors to Mereworth church will see a memorial to Miles Stapleton in the vestry, on which he is credited with starting a Sunday School on October 21st 1827. Between achieving a BA in 1827 from Magdalene College, Cambridge and his death, Miles enjoyed a brief tenure as rector of Mereworth. His handwritten sermons have survived in a book held by Kent County Archives[2]. They are uncompromising in tone: *desert God and ye are undone, eternal damnation must be your doom and in eternity will ye mourn too late your folly and ignorance*.

Those who heard these sermons must have been frozen in fear. Miles preached: *Some only pray for form's sake and because they have been brought up to think it right so to do they kneel down and hurry through a form of prayer, when their heart is not in it and that by doing so they have performed their duty; but be assured of this, that such prayers as these find no acceptance before God: nay they are an abomination to the Lord; they are a mockery of God and as such will be noted down in the Book of Judgement.* For Miles, God would punish a person for rushing their prayers, but not for keeping a person in captivity, poverty and forced labour.

Miles occasionally lived in Mereworth Castle. From time to time, even before he became rector, he preached and took services in Mereworth. His attitude to good works and charitable giving was summed up in a sermon dated 22nd August 1824 on the Bible passage: *Thou shalt open thy hand*

wide unto thy brother, to thy poor and to thy needy. [*Deuteronomy chapter 15, verse 11*]. The 1820s were times of extreme hardship for the poor, as agricultural wages had fallen and there was no state aid; people were going hungry. It would appear that Miles lined up the children of the village poor inside the church, and appealed to the wealthier villagers for money. This was not to provide the poor with any kind of relief, such as with clothing or food, but to teach the illiterate poor to read the Bible. His sermon extols the virtues of a society that had enslaved and abused millions of people. His basic premise was that God's children *can never be destitute. In every loss they have the Bible to comfort them.* Here are some extracts from that sermon about being open-handed to those in need:

We are all aware of the objects of the institution whose interests we are this day more peculiarly collected together to assist. It is to enable those who have undertaken the education of these poor children now before ye to continue their exertions in this laudable and profitable pursuit. I say profitable, for surely we should regard that pursuit as such, which tends to inculcate habits of morality and industry among the lower class, who would otherwise be totally uneducated. At such a period as the present, when so much is doing abroad, our own poor are surely not to be neglected. If those who have it in their power to aid them will not stretch forth the hand of charity, to whom are they to look? Many are averse to the education of the poor, but for what reason it would be difficult to conceive.

We have been brought into the world, not in the days of ancient obscurity, when the Sun of Righteousness had not yet risen to enlighten the gloom, but in the season of his meridian splendour; not in a region yet lying in the shadow of death,

overspread with Pagan or Mahometan darkness; not in a land where the beams of the Gospel are dimmed and repelled by the mists of Popish superstition; but in a country where they shine at large, and shine with primeval purity. We are inhabitants not of a land where despotism tramples on the rights of millions or anarchy levels all things in misery, but a realm flourishing under the influence of civil liberty.

We must therefore when we have done all in our power towards 'stretching forth our hand wide to our brethren, to the poor, and to the needy', recommend them to the care of God and pray that in his own good time, he will give the increase to our humble endeavours…

Nothing in this sermon was about extending liberty to his slaves. It contained nothing about feeding or clothing the needy of Mereworth. It was, like all his sermons, a fervent appeal for personal salvation. To a modern audience, this privileged man would appear to have had double standards. The slave-owning Reverend and Honourable Miles John Stapleton would never have thought of himself as, in his own words: *so full of prejudices, so selfish, and such very inadequate judges, that we often call evil good, and good evil.* Miles died and was taken to his family tomb in Rotherfield Greys to be buried. A simple stone commemorates him, his wife, son, daughter and son-in-law in the family mausoleum.

Sir Francis Jarvis Stapleton (1807-1874)

Miles Stapleton's successor as Mereworth rector was William Francis Cobb, a curate from Nettlestead. William lasted only two years before returning to Nettlestead as rector. In 1832,

Miles's brother, the Honourable and Reverend Sir Francis Jarvis Stapleton, Bart, (1807-1874) became our rector, and remained in post until his death. The Bart refers to his status as Baronet of the Leeward Islands, a title he inherited from his father along with his father's plantations on Antigua.

Sir Francis's ministry began at a challenging time in our history. Protectionist government policies in the 1830s had restricted cheap grain imports in order to guarantee high prices for British landowners. As a result, food prices had been kept artificially high. Adam Smith's radical proposals for Free Trade, which would have brought lower food prices, were not implemented until the mid-1840s. Smith, however, had been no advocate of State relief. Smith proposed that the unemployed should fend for themselves, starving if necessary. A common view by the 1830s was that men would work for any wage rather than let their families starve, and that low wages would both benefit landowners and reduce food prices.

By the 1830s, increased mechanisation of agriculture had reduced rural employment opportunities, and the continued enclosure of Common Land had restricted the opportunities that people had for self-reliance. In 1830 East Kent had been troubled by the violent Swing riots; property had been burned and agricultural machinery smashed. In 1834 agricultural wages had been reduced from 9 shillings a week to 6 shillings (£37.33 a week in today's money). As a result, the poor were struggling, and the only recourse for the able-bodied was Parish Poor Relief when families couldn't make ends meet. Poor relief was administered by the church parish and supplemented a man's income based on the value of 3.8kg of

bread and the number of children he had. The relief was usually paid in goods rather than cash.

We are lucky enough to have Sir Francis's albeit damaged notebook concerning the distribution of relief to the poor, Mereworth Sunday School, and the church choir. The book, which runs from 1833 to 1870, contains the names of village families and is rather like a census in places. It has accounts of who received relief, payments for singing in the church, and payments made to support the village poor, including a clothing club and coal club. The book is now in safekeeping at the Kent County Archives in Maidstone.

Sir Francis's notebook records the names of all those in Mereworth who received clothing or broth as part of the social welfare system of the 1830s. The notebook lists how many children were in each Mereworth household (including, in 1835, the two orphans, Betsy and Sarah Wood). The census of households in Mereworth appears to have been carried out by volunteers. For example, on March 11th 1834, a Mrs Kemp visited the houses in Butchers Lane to check the number of children in each family. The 12th entry on her list was R. Large, who had one daughter. Against this entry there is written, presumably in judgement of Mr Large: *appears an infidel*.

In Mereworth, the £40 fund for poor relief was found from a variety of sources. In 1836, for example, money collected for poor relief was made up of:

- *£11 2s 6d from Sir Francis himself [£1,384 in today's value]*
- *£3 17s 6d from money collected from sacraments during the year up to Christmas 1835,*
- *£5 from the Dowager Lady Le Despencer,*

- *£20 from Mary Lady Le Despencer charity [founded in 1625, and continued until this day]*

Unlike his brother, Miles, Sir Francis showed a genuine interest in the material welfare of children in the parish. By starting a choir, he instituted a fair means of allowing children to work towards supporting themselves. The notebook states:

Rules for the regulation of singers in Mereworth Church

1. *Each singer to receive 3d [about £1.55 today] per Sunday to be given at Christmas in clothing. Boys or girl may belong to the singers – no one under the age of nine years of age.*
2. *A singer being absent both morning and evening services on any one Sunday, or two practising evenings successively, without leave, to forfeit three pence – sickness an exception – the forfeits to be deducted from the value of clothing given at Christmas.*
3. *The singers must be parishioners. The names of those who absent themselves without leave, for two Sundays or two practising Evenings successively to be struck off the list, unless their nonattendance arises from sickness or any other sufficient cause.*
4. *John Field to have a list of the names and to keep an account of the attendance and conduct at church and during the practising evenings, also to have a copy of the rules.*

The notebook goes on to record the money that children earned in their choir duties each year. One entry reads: *Names of singers and remuneration at Christmas 1836: Fanny Bratton 10s 9d, Sarah Brooker 13s, Anne Newman 12s 9d, John Ellis 13s, William Ellis 12s 9d, Maria Bedell 12s 6d, Kesiah Phillips 12s 6d, Naomi Samson 12s 9d, George Sudds 9s 6d, Mary Pankhurst 9s 9d, Total £5 19s 3d* [£742 in today's values].

In addition, Francis gave prizes and threw a party for the children each year. The entry for August 21st 1835 lists the children who had received prizes in Sunday School. Girls were given *cotton for a frock*, and boys *fustian for trousers*. Elizabeth Wood, however, received a pair of shoes. The notebook continues:

The same day all the Sunday School (except those who had been naughty during the year) and those children who sing in the church together with teachers John Field and Martha and Sam Evenden dined at the rectory and went away at 5 o'clock in the evening.

As time went by, despite the poor harvests and recession of the 1840s, Britain became more prosperous, and the old Poor Laws were replaced by the workhouse system. Sir Francis continued his parties for village children, giving them each August a substantial meal of roast beef and plum pudding, and letting them play games such as cricket in the rectory garden. He also organised clubs for villagers to save money for winter coal. His notebook records all of this, but by the 1860s it gives the impression that such activities were more of a village tradition than an urgent need to prevent starvation.

The notebook does not, of course, record the privations felt by the poor in the 1830s. Using other sources to understand the hardships of this time puts Sir Francis's notebook in context. It also highlights Sir Francis's great generosity in putting his own money each year into helping the impoverished people of Mereworth in the straitened years of the 1830s. The stained-glass window above the altar of Saint Lawrence's, that shows an angel and the three Marys at the tomb of our Lord, is in Sir

Francis's memory. Rotherfield Greys church, where Sir Francis is buried, also has a resurrection window in his memory.

Mary Frances Elizabeth Stapleton (1822-1891)

Mary was the only child of Thomas Stapleton. In 1831 she effectively inherited Mereworth Castle and became a baroness when her grandfather died. She married Evelyn Boscawen, 6th Viscount Falmouth in 1845 to become Viscountess Falmouth. Her husband, however, acquired Mereworth Castle by marrying her. Mary and Evelyn donated our pipe organ in 1882 at a cost of £200 (about £31,000 in today's money).

Eliot Henry Stapleton (1835 – 1892)

On Sir Francis's death in 1874, his son the Reverend Eliot Henry Stapleton became rector of Mereworth. Eliot had been curate at Mereworth in 1860 before becoming rector at Buckhorn in Dorset. Mary, Viscountess Falmouth, was his first cousin. Eliot enlarged our church organ in 1892 in memory of his wife.

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The church retains a legacy of the Stapleton family, which owned the castle estate and provided its rectors for most of the nineteenth century. Perhaps we should not judge the past by the values of today, but it is hard to ignore the family's links to slavery. Fortunately, Antigua, where the Stapletons had the plantations that helped fund their privileged lifestyle, is now one of the Caribbean's more prosperous nations. Tourism and offshore financial services have given back the descendants of the Stapletons' slaves some of the wealth that was stolen from them generations ago.

The Changing Churchyard

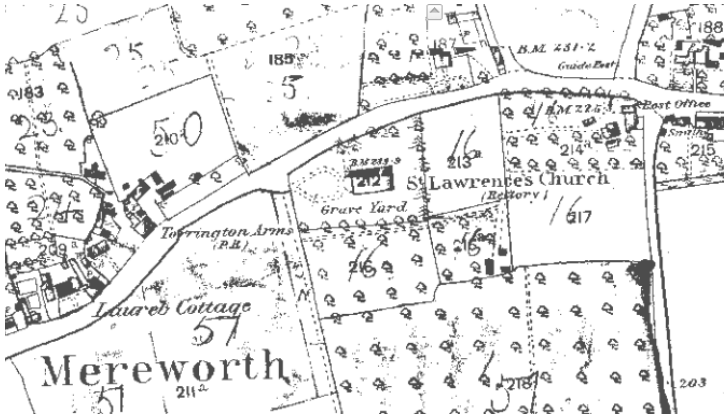
When the church was built in 1746, the churchyard was surrounded by a fine ragstone wall capped with golden sandstone. The north wall and part of the west wall are the surviving sections of this wall. It is likely that part of the east wall is also of the same date, but with the sandstone having been replaced by bricks in 1933.

The earliest reliable map of the area is dated 1789 and shows the boundary of the churchyard sketched in. The 1830s tithe map, the 1870's Ordnance Survey map and an 1886 grave plan all show the churchyard within its original boundary wall.

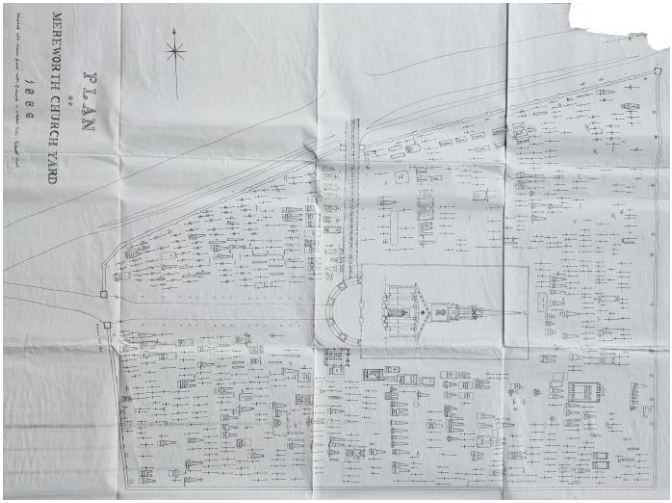
Map of 1789 showing extent of boundary wall around the churchyard © British Library[10]

An intriguing feature of the of the 1830s and 1870s maps is that the original western driveway is shown as circular, not straight. This must have been to allow horse-drawn coaches to drop people off at the covered portico and then to move on without having to reverse. By 1886 the path is shown as straight, no doubt to allow more room for burials. By 1886, however, burial space was running out.

1830s Tithe Map showing the original churchyard boundary wall and the circular drive © Kent Archives and Local History Service (reference CTR 247B)

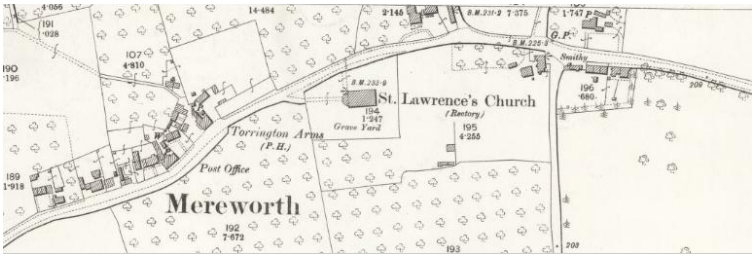


First edition 1:2500 OS Map circa 1875 showing little change since the 1830s © Ordnance Survey

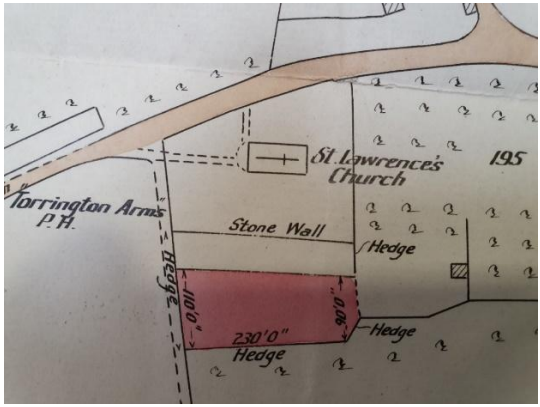


1886 burial plan of the churchyard showing an unchanged boundary wall but a straight drive up to the portico

The churchyard was first extended by half an acre in 1889, and the original southern boundary wall was demolished. The 1896 Ordnance Survey map shows the southern boundary about 12 metres further south. A 1932 deed plan shows a replacement stone wall that was probably demolished when the churchyard was again extended in 1916. The third and final extension came in 1932 when Lord Falmouth donated more land to accommodate burials. Church records describe the clearance of that land in the 1930s, and the generosity of The Honourable Esmond Harmsworth in 1933 in providing a new stone wall to enclose the churchyard. When the new perimeter wall was built in Spring 1933, however, the boundary was neatly straightened out in the south-east corner of the new churchyard to make the wall easier to build!



1896 map showing a new southern boundary © Ordnance Survey[11]



1932 deed plan for the final extension of the graveyard © Kent Archives and Local History Service (ref P247/3/5)

The churchyard extension had been an orchard, and this had been cleared by November 1932 when it was decided: *to allow anyone to take away wood from the extension, that which was not removed within a few days would be burnt.* This must have provided parishioners with some welcome winter fuel. Our new wall also replaced an ancient hedge. A 1938 map shows the boundary in its present position. There is a memorial plaque on the southern wall inscribed: *The land for this extension was given by Viscount Falmouth. The wall a gift of the Hon Esmond Harmsworth 1933*.

Mereworth Recipes

In 1883, Lady Sarah Lindsay (1813 to 1890) published her *Choice Recipes*[12]. In her preface Lady Sarah writes: *Having collected, by permission, these recipes from manuscript books of my family and friends, I can vouch for their being authentic.* The book was sold to raise money for an unspecified charity and contains several recipes attributed either to Mereworth Castle or to its occupant, Viscountess Falmouth. One of the Mereworth Castle "recipes" is an instruction on how to manage Brussel Sprouts in the garden. Some of Lady Falmouth's recipes are probably from her Cornish kitchen. Here, however, are her three recipes from Mereworth Castle:

Egg Sandwiches

The yolks of 2 hard-boiled eggs pounded in a mortar with a little chopped parsley, butter, salt, cayenne pepper, and a very little chutnee. When of a fine paste, spread on the sandwich bread, and put slices of chicken, and small salad chopped

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Saffron Cake

4 lbs. flour, ¼ lb. sultanas, ¾ lb. butter, ½ lb. lard, 2 ozs. sugar, 1 oz. lemon peel candied, a pinch of saffron soaked in milk or water, half a tea-cup of yeast. It must be wetted with milk or buttermilk, and covered with a cloth, before baking, till it rises.

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Thin Biscuits.
Excellent

1 lb. of flour, 2ozs. of butter. Mix with a large jug of warm milk; beat it with a rolling pin, and roll it out as thin *as* possible*; prick it and cut it out with a large saucer; bake in a quick oven for two or three minutes.*

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Jane Grigson elaborated on the Thin Biscuit recipe in her 1974 book *English Food*[13].

Mereworth Biscuits

½ lb plain flour *Pinch of salt*
1 oz butter *Hot milk*

Rub the first three ingredients together. Then mix to a dough with hot milk – it should be firm but soft. Knead it well. Roll out small bits of the dough to paper thinness: it will look and feel like a piece of cloth. Cut into approximately 2" rounds with a plain scone cutter and bake at Mark 7, 425°F [218°C], for about 5 minutes, until they are slightly browned and puffed up. Cool and store in an airtight box.

The recipe makes a large number of light biscuits which taste delicious with butter alone, or with butter and a soft cheese. The thinner you can roll them the better. Some will puff up into a balloon; others will have two or three bubbles.

Old Mereworth Castle and Church

Many people have asked what the old castle and church looked like. This is not a new query, and it has never been answered. In the February 1854 edition of *Notes and Queries: A Medium of Intercommunication for Literary Men*[14] someone under the name Cantianus asked the same question:

Among your subscribers there are doubtless many collectors of topographical drawings and engravings. I shall feel specially obliged if any of them could find in their collections a view of old Mereworth Castle (as it stood prior to the comparatively modern erection of Lord Westmorland), and furnish me with a long desiderated description of it. Local tradition represents it as having been a baronial castle rising from the middle of a small lake, like that of Leeds, though of smaller dimensions, with the parish church attached. I should rather conjecture it to have been an ancient moated manor-house, magnified, in the course of tradition, into a baronial castle and lake.

It is hardly likely that no view should have been taken of it; I have searched, however, in vain for it in published collections. It would be a matter of special interest to many besides myself, to obtain some information respecting it.

John, seventh earl, the builder of the present Palladian mansion, died in 1762, when the barony of Despencer was called out of abeyance in favour of Sir Francis Dashwood, the son of Mary, sister and eldest co-heir of John, and heir to his estates. On his death, Sir Thomas Stapleton, sole heir to the Barony of Despencer (as lineal descendant and heir of Catherine, the younger sister and co-heir of the said John),

succeeded to the estate; and from him it has lineally descended to Mary, Viscountess Falmouth, the present representative of the family. At Mereworth Castle itself, where the Viscount and Viscountess reside, there is no view of the old building; but it is very possible that some drawing or engraving of it may exist in some of the residences of the Earls of Westmorland, at the seat of the Dashwoods, or in the British Museum. I hope that, among your numerous readers, someone may be in a position to give information on the subject.

There is no record of anyone ever having replied. When the Stapletons were obliged to sell possessions to pay off debts in 1831, the sale catalogue listed no pictures of old Mereworth[15].

The earliest depiction of the present Mereworth Castle, however, is dated 1746. The painting, part of the Royal Collection, has a rather fanciful background, but in it the new church stands out against the distant hills. To the right of the church and just to the left of the castle the artist has painted some ruins, which may well be the remains of the old church, which was being demolished in 1746.

Detail from Antonio Visentini's "Capriccio with a view of Mereworth Castle, Kent" Signed and dated 1746 (Royal Collection Trust)[16]

References and Acknowledgements:

The research, on which this booklet was based, focused on documents in *Kent Archives and Local History Service* (LHS), and on internet sources including Wikipedia. Some of the pieces in this booklet have previously appeared in the *Mereworth & West Peckham Record*. I should like particularly to acknowledge the following sources of information:

1. *The Case of Belgium in the Present War (Macmillan 1914).*
2. *Kent Archives & LHS (references P247/28/3 and U3844/Z1)*
3. *The Gentleman's Magazine (January 1789) page 5.*
4. *G. Le Grys Norgate "The Life of Sir Walter Scott" (1906) page 208.*
5. *The National Archives: Coldstream Guards records WO-95-1263-1.*
6. *Sir J. E. Edmonds "Military operations, France and Belgium, 1914" (Macmillan 1937) pages 263 to 270.*
7. *The British Newspaper Archive.*
8. *G. E. Hunt: "The Finances of Sir Thomas Stapleton in the Early Nineteenth Century" (Archaeologia Cantiana. volume 76: 1961).*
9. *UCL: Slave Compensation Commission database.*
10. *"Old Maps Online" software app.*
11. *National Library of Scotland map database.*
12. *Lady Sarah Lindsay: "A Few Choice Recipes" (Bentley 1883).*
13. *Jane Grigson: "English Food" (Macmillan 1974) page 280.*
14. *"Notes and Queries: A Medium of Inter-communication for Literary Men, Artists, Antiquaries, Genealogist, etc." Volume IX Number 224 (February 1854) page 124.*
15. *"Mereworth Castle, Kent: A Catalogue of the Extensive Library of Books … and Original Paintings which will be sold by auction by Messrs Farebrother and Co on Thursday, 7th of April, 1831".*
16. *The Royal Collection Trust online: "Capriccio with a view of Mereworth Castle, Kent" (dated 1746).*
17. *Stewart Trotter: "Three Jacobite Symbols in St Mary le Strand Church" (blog dated December 15, 2022).*

I am indebted to Mereworth Parochial Church Council which kindly provided me with access to its records and to the church to allow my researches to continue over the years. I have also drawn on Mr Andrew Wells's excellent guidebook to Saint Lawrence's, which is on sale in the church.

Some of the original 1740s church decoration:

An unusual gilded IHS monogram at the top of a gilded starburst. With the Ten Commandments board it is now in the north-east corner of the east wall, but once took central place above the altar.

Part of the frieze around the church nave depicting the sacred Hebrew name for God. This is reminiscent of a decorative symbol above the altar of the church of Saint Mary le Strand, London. [17]

Sir John de Mereworth (1280 – 1366)
A brass moved in 1746 from the old church into the mausoleum

Robert Earl

October 2023